

A FORGOTTEN MURDER, A NEGLECTED FRENCH FASCISM

Joel Blatt

University of Connecticut, Stamford Campus

Gayle K. Brunelle and Annette Finley-Croswhite, *Murder in the Metro: Laetitia Toureaux and the Cagoule in 1930s France* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010).

A reference in a tour guide to the murder of Laetitia Toureaux, the first murder committed in the Paris metro, piqued the historical curiosity of Gayle K. Brunelle and Annette Finley-Croswhite. It led these two historians of early modern France into the treacherous waters of the 1930s. Following struggles for access to archives, their persistence paid off with this book, which follows a number of trajectories. First, the authors trace the life of Laetitia Toureaux, analyzing it in terms of gender, class, ethnicity, and identity so as to explore the social, cultural, and political labyrinths of this era. Next, they provide a valuable survey of the little-studied extreme right political group nicknamed the Cagoule (the “hooded ones”). Third, they suggest Toureaux’s clandestine activities as an informer for the police and others and attempt to unravel the mystery of her murder. Finally, they examine a “collective amnesia” in France about the Cagoule and therefore about Laetitia Toureaux after World War II.

Finley-Croswhite and Brunelle present a well-researched portrait of the murder victim through the prisms of gender, class, and ethnicity. Laetitia Yolande Nourrisat Toureaux was born in 1907 in the Val d’Aoste, Savoy, in northern Italy. She emigrated to France in 1920 with her mother, while her father remained in Italy. For the authors, her social status as a working-class Italian immigrant woman with intense aspirations to rise into the French middle classes provides the key to understanding her personality and life trajectory. Laetitia worked in factories to support herself, becoming a habitu   of the *bals musette*, dance halls with their “demi-monde” allure, vibrancy, and social



and cultural fascination. In 1929, she entered into a happy marriage with the son of the owner of the potting factory in which she worked; but her husband, Sylvain Jules Toureaux, kept the marriage secret, only telling his parents about it as he was dying. After his death in 1935, Laetitia was “disinherited” and left with the naturalized French citizenship attained via her marriage, but with little else. Brunelle and Finley-Croswhite conclude, however: “In the class-bound society of 1930s Paris, even a secret marriage represented an amazing victory....” (36–38). The authors’ story is one of Balzacian dimensions.

Brunelle and Finley-Croswhite are acutely sensitive to the gender dimensions of Laetitia’s history. Following her husband’s death, Laetitia returned to the *bals musette* as a single woman and took a number of lovers. After her murder, the press exploited her life, distorting her story into a “good woman/bad woman,” traditional woman/independent woman morality lesson (70). The authors conclude that journalistic accounts “reflected a pronounced hostility toward women that permeated interwar French society and grew more intense as the 1930s progressed” and as European politics veered to the right (62, 72).

Following her husband’s death, Laetitia also resumed earning a living and pursuing social mobility. She chose “adventurous” but dangerous employment with a private detective firm. Its head, Georges Gustave Rouffignac, who had links to the police, placed her in the Maxi factory, where she worked diligently but also informed on union and leftist political activists. Rouffignac and a police official also placed her in the leftist Ligue républicaine du bien public, even though her political beliefs were fervently rightist and she supported Italian Fascism. Laetitia also worked (probably for Rouffignac) in the cloakrooms of the *bals musette*. She liked being a private investigator because she met “people in ‘high places’” and could “make something of herself” (52). The authors maintain that she also worked in this capacity for Italian Fascism.

They analyze Laetitia’s “identities” as part of a discussion of changing identities of women in 1930s France. They sympathize with “this resourceful woman” (75) who sought “to refashion her identity” (73). Laetitia “straddled” the different worlds of her family and of the Valdôtaine community, serving as a “cultural broker” between the police and the “streets” (73), frequenting the *bals musette* but also aspiring to rise into the middle classes. According to the authors, “class and ethnicity” posed even greater obstacles to her ambitions than gender (73, 75). When Laetitia’s roles as a police informer and as a denizen of the *bals musette* intersected with the Cagoule, it cost her life.

Although they deny writing a history of the Cagoule, Brunelle and Finley-Croswhite have produced at least a mini-history of it. They discuss its actions, organization, practices, financing, social and cultural backgrounds, leadership, women, and overall plot. The Organisation secrète d’action révolutionnaire nationale (shortened to OSAR), or Comité secret d’action révolutionnaire (CSAR), or the Cagoule, were secessionists from the far right Action française. Considering the latter insufficiently activist, they came together in mid-1936 after the electoral victory of the Popular Front, against which they frenetically

prepared a coup d'état. Such an action would allegedly save France, in their view, by overthrowing both the Popular Front government and the Third Republic, which they would replace with a rightist dictatorship. To that end, the Cagoule recruited and organized in a military fashion, clandestinely imported large stocks of weapons and ammunition (bought with money contributed by industrialists), established relations with Fascist Italy and Spanish Nationalists, and sought the support of the French military.

To gain the backing of the army and the population, the Cagoule provoked disorder through violence. In March 1937, the OSAR assassinated Dimitry Navachine, who was partly Jewish, a mason, and a prominent Russian emigré economist who consulted for the Popular Front. Jean Filiol, the second most important leader of the Cagoule after Eugène Deloncle, and the head of its action brigade, stabbed Navachine in the Bois de Boulogne. On 9 June 1937, a seven-member Cagoule execution team led by Filiol ambushed Carlo and Nello Rosselli near Bagnoles de l'Orne in Normandy. Carlo Rosselli had become perhaps the foremost Italian antifascist, and the CSAR carried out his assassination at the behest of Italian Fascist leaders. In return, they received 100 semi-automatic weapons that they hoped would be a down-payment on sustained support for their coup d'état. In late August 1937, at Toussus-le-Noble near Paris, *cagouleurs* led by Filiol sabotaged several planes destined for Spanish Loyalists. In September 1937, in hopes of building anti-Communist hysteria, the Cagoule exploded two bombs in central Paris ("the Étoile attack") at the main offices of two important business associations, causing extensive damage and killing two policemen. On the evening of 15 November 1937, the CSAR mobilized its members for a coup d'état, but demobilized when Deloncle decided that his organization had failed to attract sufficient support from the army. The authors conclude that the Cagoule "came far closer to achieving their goals than many people, then and since, have realized" (142).

Finley-Croswhite and Brunelle also trace the Cagoule's subsequent history. Deloncle and some of his cohort were arrested, while Filiol and others fled into exile in Italy and Spain. For political and diplomatic reasons, French governments avoided trying the *cagouleurs* prior to World War II. With the coming of the war, they released Deloncle and others. *Cagouleurs* fought in the Battle of France. Some went with Vichy, several went with de Gaulle, and some later joined the Resistance. Deloncle founded the Mouvement social révolutionnaire as the successor to the Cagoule. He collaborated with the Germans for a while, including active support of the German invasion of the Soviet Union; however, he was eventually killed in a shootout with the Gestapo in January 1944. A trial took place only in 1948, and with Deloncle dead and Filiol in exile in Spain, just a number of the responsible *cagouleurs* remained in the dock.

In the book's last section, "Speculation and Memory," Brunelle and Finley-Croswhite reason their way towards resolving the mystery of who killed Laetitia Toureaux at about 6:30 in the evening on 16 May 1937, by a single

stab from a knife through her neck in an empty first class car of the Paris metro. They maintain that she was an informer for the French police and worked for both “the Italian secret service” and the Cagoule; as such, she ran a “terrible risk” (177). It was also widely rumored that Laetitia took as a lover Gabriel Jeantet, scion of an upper middle-class family and one of the OSAR’s leading figures. The authors believe that in the context of the upcoming Rosselli assassination, both the Cagoule and “the Italian secret service” feared she might reveal their plans to the French police; they thus had a strong motive to eliminate her. The authors ultimately argue that following two failed attempts to kill Laetitia by the Cagoule, the Italian Fascists chose a “professional” to murder her (173).

Finley-Croswhite and Brunelle lament the “collective amnesia” in France during the decades after World War II with regard to the Cagoule and the murder of Laetitia Toureaux (193). Persistent concerns about Franco-Italian relations are a partial explanation, but more fundamentally, the French wished to forget the profound divisions of the 1930s and of the Vichy period. Moreover, prominent public figures had personal reasons to keep their pasts secret. In conclusion, the authors astutely characterize the Cagoule as “not a mass movement, but a conspiracy of terrorists inspired by fascism and nurtured by an unstable political climate that was tied to the looming certainty of a coming war” (208). They also emphasize the ways in which the life of “one remarkable woman, even though of humble origins, can illuminate a critical moment in French history” (199).

I wish to comment on the authors’ sources, their assessment of the Cagoule’s significance, and their analysis of who murdered Laetitia Toureaux. Brunelle and Finley-Croswhite have achieved command of the sources relevant to the French dimensions of their topic, but they are less grounded on the Italian side. The many virtues of this book stem from their extensive reading of primary and secondary sources in, for example, the French National Archives, the Archives of the City of Paris, and the Archives of the Paris Police Prefecture. The authors also include a good historiographical essay. I would add one item to their bibliography: an historically and psychologically evocative speech and essay of 1941 by Deloncle, “Les idées et l’action.” In it, he vividly reminisces about his insurrectionary extreme rightist mindset of 1936–1937.

I share the authors’ conviction that the Cagoule’s significance has been seriously underestimated. Although not their primary objective, Finley-Croswhite and Brunelle challenge “the immunity thesis,” the idea that France avoided fascism during the 1930s for reasons embedded deeply in its historical development (206–207). Indeed, Jean Filiol led a fascist squad, which resembled the Italian *squadristi*, and perhaps even more a group called the Italian Ceka, established by Mussolini soon after he attained power to kill his primary political opponents.¹ Of all the extreme right French groups, the Cagoule came closest to attempting a coup d’état.

Nevertheless, the authors sometimes exaggerate the Cagoule's importance. They regard the extensive clandestine importation of weapons as the OSAR's greatest "danger" (136, 141), suggesting that the weapons could have been shared with other "more legitimate right-wing groups" (141). In their view, this implies the potential for an alliance of the extreme Right (208). My own reading of the Cagoule, however, supports the traditional historical interpretation, which characterizes the French far Right as weakened by its divisions. The authors generally do a good job of weeding out the sensationalism of the times that attributed membership in the Cagoule to prominent figures, but some additional observations are warranted. Marshal Philippe Pétain knew about the Cagoule plot and most likely did not inform the government; but he did not support it. According to Georges Loustaunau-Lacau, Pétain watched and waited. The renegade Loustaunau-Lacau himself reached an arrangement with the Cagoule, but he was not a *cagouillard*. Finally, Marie-Madeleine Méric (later Marie-Madeleine Fourcade), Loustaunau-Lacau's intimate political ally during the 1930s, was not a *cagouillard* nor was she shaped by the OSAR (121, 103, 147). And while the authors also do a good job of following the trail of money entering the CSAR's coffers, I question their characterization of the "shrewdness" and "extensive political experience" of the industrialists who contributed to the Cagoule (139). Similar to the *cagouillards* themselves, these industrialists responded to the extreme political polarization of the mid-1930s by throwing themselves rashly into the political maelstrom. Finally, I agree with the authors when they recognize that if the Cagoule plot highlights one extreme instance of French political radicalism during the 1930s, its failure also reveals a certain "resiliency" of the Third Republic (208). Battered and bruised, "Marianne" still weathered the Cagoule storm (at least temporarily).

Brunelle and Finley-Crowwhite present two alternatives, the Cagoule and the Italian Fascists, as Laetitia Toureaux's killers, but recognize the "speculative" nature of their "scenario for a murder" (171, 173). They are almost certainly correct in locating the motive for the crime in Toureaux's roles as an informer or agent for the French police, Italian Fascism, and the Cagoule. Specific information about what she did for these entities, however, is in short supply. If Laetitia informed for the French police (and she probably did), and at least as importantly, the Cagoule thought she did, we do not know whether she reported to the Paris Police Prefecture, the *Sûreté nationale*, or some other office. If she worked for the Italian Fascists, we do not know if it was for the Italian Political Police (OVRA) or for the Italian Military Intelligence (The Servizio Informazione Militare—SIM). We are thus condemned to a world of supposition.

Using the authors' evidence and my own, from research into the assassination of Carlo and Nello Rosselli, I partially disagree with their deduction that "the Italian secret service" murdered Laetitia Toureaux. Assuming two "bungled" attempts to kill her by the Cagoule, the authors conclude that the Italians brought in "a professional possessed of greater expertise and cunning

than ... Filiol" (173,187). In this instance, in my opinion, they underestimate Filiol and the Cagoule. They also undervalue the confession of Pierre-René Locuty, who told interrogators that François Méténier "boasted" about the Cagoule's role in Toureaux's murder (179, 181). They likewise inadequately consider the confession of Fernand Jakubiez, who relayed that Filiol had divulged to him his responsibility for the killing. Since Méténier was a member of the inner circle of the Cagoule, and since Jakubiez participated, under Filiol's leadership, in the assassination of the Rosselli brothers, these are highly credible sources offering what was probably accurate information. In addition, subsequent retractions of the confessions by Locuty and Jakubiez, emphasized by the authors, were common practice for the Cagoule, probably a result of threats from within the organization.

At the same time, the authors overvalue statements by Aristide Corre and Gabriel Jeantet (Toureaux's putative lover) blaming the Italians for the crime. For different reasons, both these men are unreliable sources in this matter. Moreover, in contrast to the authors, I believe that the Toureaux crime fits closely with the Cagoule's *modus operandi*. They assert that neither Filiol nor the Cagoule wished for their crimes to remain "anonymous" (187), yet Toureaux's murderer remained unknown. The Cagoule certainly wished maximum publicity for their crimes, but not for their roles as perpetrators, which they went to great lengths to hide. The murder of Laetitia Toureaux closely resembled the Cagoule's other killings. Navachine, Carlo and Nello Rosselli, and Toureaux were all foreigners. Stabbing played a prominent part in each murder. The Cagoule's leaders executed those whom they thought had betrayed them. In 1937, the execution of Laetitia Toureaux fit perfectly into the Cagoule plot to sow fear and terror in France. What better way to foster instability than a brutal murder in the metro! The Cagoule wanted popular opinion to be asking: was anyone safe any longer in France from assaults by foreigners and communists?

The simplest explanation is often the most plausible, and the preponderance of evidence points to the Cagoule, not to the Italian Fascists. The OSAR suspected Laetitia Toureaux, whose lover was probably one of their leaders, of being an informer for the French police. Finley-Croswhite and Brunelle are probably correct that the Cagoule's deep involvement in preparations for the Rosselli assassination influenced their decision. The instability represented by a murder in the metro might nudge the French Army towards supporting the OSAR. For me, therefore, the evidence in this book largely resolves the mystery of who executed Laetitia Toureaux.

Yet a question remains: what role, if any, did Italian Fascism play? The Italian dimension is at least as great a conundrum as the French role. The authors' decision to introduce a professional Italian killer requires discussion of Italian Fascist operations in France; however, they do not always distinguish clearly between the Italian Political Police (OVRA) and the Italian Military Intelligence (SIM). OVRA developed an especially large and effective spy

operation in the Paris region, which the French only uncovered in 1938. The names of OVRA's major spies were revealed after World War II and are listed in Mauro Canali's *Le spie del regime* (2004) and Mimmo Franzinelli's *I tentacoli dell'Ovra* (1999). Although Toureaux is not cited among OVRA's significant agents, it is possible that she worked for Italian intelligence in 1929 and later, as a low-level informer for OVRA. Incidentally, OVRA had a police inspector in the Paris Police Prefecture on its payroll; therefore, if Toureaux was an informer for the Prefecture, OVRA could have known. Meanwhile, in 1937, Italian Foreign Minister Count Galeazzo Ciano and Mussolini had delegated organizational responsibility for the assassination of Carlo Rosselli to Colonel Santo Emanuele, the head of SIM's Third Section (Counter-Intelligence). It was SIM, not OVRA, that reached the agreement with the Cagoule on 22 March 1937, by which the OSAR would assassinate Carlo Rosselli in return for 100 semi-automatic weapons. Still, evidence made available during the past decade shows that SIM and OVRA cooperated during the last phase of the assassination plot against Carlo Rosselli. Emanuele appears to have initiated this coordination on a visit to Paris during the second week of May 1937, only days before Toureaux's murder, which might bolster the argument of Brunelle and Finley-Croswhite. They emphasize trips by Toureaux across the Franco-Italian border in 1936–1937. She also boasted of planning to be present at a reception offered by Ciano. The authors are not completely clear whether she was working for OVRA or SIM; however, they do portray her as a low-level courier between the Cagoule and Italian Fascism (175, 184–86). If Emanuele knew about Toureaux and worried about her role as an informer for the French police, he could have encouraged the Cagoule to eliminate her; or, alternatively, if he came to Paris to prod the Cagoule to assassinate Carlo Rosselli, the Cagoule might have responded to the pressure by murdering Toureaux. At one point, the authors mention “confessions of Emanuele, Navale (Emanuele's subordinate in SIM), and Anfuso (Ciano's chief aide) about Italy's involvement in her murder as well as those of the Rosselli brothers” (189); however, they do not provide a footnote, without which I am unable to assess this claim.

There is one additional area in which I may have a nuanced difference of opinion with the authors. They characterize Toureaux as a “fascinating woman,” a “remarkable woman” (199). I share some of the authors' admiration for Laetitia's grit, her determination to live life fully, her ambition and resiliency. Certainly, Toureaux did not deserve to be brutally murdered. Still, although the authors recognize her flaws, I am more troubled than they by her informing on her co-workers at the Maxi factory and on members of the leftist Ligue républicaine du bien publique. Moreover, it was people whose fascist ideology she apparently shared, according to the authors, who killed her.

Given the complexity of their topic, Finley-Croswhite and Brunelle have done a good job in limiting the numbers of errors, but there are some that should be mentioned. Nello Rosselli was visiting his brother in France but was

living in Italy; he was neither an emigré nor an exile, nor was he a professor at the University of Florence (80–82, 87, 151). Carlo Rosselli was a mountain climber of robust physicality and charisma, who throughout most of his life did not have a “poor constitution”; however, he did suffer from phlebitis as a boy and had a recurrence in 1936–1937 following a wound in Spain (87). After the murders of Carlo and Nello Rosselli, the assassins dragged the bodies into the underbrush and forest, but they did not drive the bodies some distance away (92). There is division in the literature about the correct spelling of Jean Filiol’s name. I have spelled it with one “l” because most of the time internal police and judicial documents do so. Retired Air Force General Edouard Duseigneur was too deeply involved in the Cagoule to have avoided participation in “the Cagoule’s illegal activities” (110). Although the authors state the correct dates elsewhere, Deloncle was killed in a shootout with the Gestapo on 7 January 1944, not 1943 (165), and Tonia Masse was killed in October 1941, not 1943 (177). Finally, Jean Bouvyer settled in Brazil, not Paraguay (191).

The above critiques do not diminish the many virtues of this work. *Murder in the Metro* is a serious book that contributes to our understanding of interwar France. It offers rich insight into the culture, society, and politics of the polarized 1930s. It presents with sensitivity the struggles of an Italian immigrant woman “to make something of herself” while faced with limited options. The authors give a detailed account, gleaned from intensive research in primary and secondary sources, of a much neglected aspect of 1930s France. Indeed, the Cagoule was a significant French fascist movement that attempted to launch a coup d’état at one of the moments of greatest political division in twentieth-century France. Although I disagree in part with their conclusion, Brunelle and Finley-Croswhite have elaborated the context in which the murder occurred and clearly identified the two possible perpetrators. Finally, they successfully breathe historical life back into Laetitia Yolande Nourrisat Toureaux.

JOEL BLATT is an Associate Professor of European History at the University of Connecticut, Stamford Campus. He has edited a book with an “Introduction”: *The French Defeat of 1940: Reassessments* (1998, 2000). He has also published a number of articles and essays, including, “The Cagoule Plot, 1936–1937” in *Crisis and Renewal in France, 1918–1962*, edited by Kenneth Mouré and Martin S. Alexander (2001). He is a four-time recipient of the Outstanding Teacher Award at UCONN/Stamford.

Notes

1. See Mauro Canali, "The Matteotti Murder and the Origins of Mussolini's Totalitarian Fascist Regime in Italy," *The Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 14, 2 (June 2009): 143–67.

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